



Documentary and Technology: A Committed Relationship?

AS NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES CONTINUE TO PROLIFERATE, GIVING RISE TO UNPRECEDENTED FORUMS AND FRONTIERS FOR NONFICTION FILMMAKING, WE HAVE BEGUN TO SEE THE RISE OF NOVEL FORMS SUCH AS THE 'WEBDOC' – DOCUMENTARIES THAT ARE ACCESSIBLE ONLINE, AND WITH HIGHLY INTERACTIVE AND PARTICIPATIVE COMPONENTS. KIM MUNRO EXAMINES THE CURRENT STATE AND FUTURE OF THE WEBDOC IN THE AUSTRALIAN SCREEN LANDSCAPE.

Technological advancement continues to drive documentary forms into new areas of possibility. From the emergence of sync sound as a capability for portable cameras in the 1960s to digital video cameras enabling personal and reflective documentary-making, documentary production, forms and distribution have expanded. But to what end? The recent hype surrounding virtual reality (VR) promises a new world of immersive engagement with alternative reality (AR) in near pursuits. At the same time, recent funding and industry support for web series have allowed shorter, 'edgier' content with slicker production values to reach broader audiences than previously possible.

Yet, while it's easy to get excited by the latest innovation, each technology should be considered in terms of what it can offer makers and audiences of documentary. In other words, what does each technology allow us to do with the documentary form? This article doesn't attempt to address the plethora of interactive, immersive or participatory documentary forms in Australia, as the scope is far too wide for this space. Rather, it will take a look at the current state of one of these forms: the interactive online documentary, or 'webdoc'. Although often unknown or dismissed as marginal, webdocs can, in fact, facilitate unique ways to achieve documentary's traditional functions of framing the world, engaging in discussions and debates around matters of concern, and making the unseen visible.

Expanded definitions

Although the definition of 'documentary' might be fuzzy, for want of a better option, John Grierson's 'creative treatment of actuality'¹ continues to endure. However, the multivalent properties and forms of interactive documentary make the term even less definable. Scholarly work in the field has largely been led by the UK-based i-Docs team, co-founded by Judith Aston, Sandra Gaudenzi and Mandy Rose, all of whom have connections and experience across industry, practice and academia. Aston, Gaudenzi and Rose maintain their non-categorical definition of interactive documentary as 'any project that starts with the intention to engage with the real, and that uses digital interactive technology to realise this intention'.² This can include, but is not limited to, online web-based documentaries, mobile apps, locative works that use geo-positioning technology, and documentary games and installations. Despite having multiple forms, the webdoc shares a central question concerning how such documentary projects can present material, enable participation, and make manifest multiple stories and knowledge.

Australian webdocs

While the Melbourne International Film Festival screened a handful of VR documentaries in its 2016 program, webdocs have been a mainstay at international festivals such as CPH:DOX, the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), Sheffield Doc/Fest, Tribeca, and South by Southwest for a number of years. Perhaps due to the lack of a large-scale documentary festival or limited market potential, these projects have largely been obscured from any public forum in Australia. In 2014, the Antenna Documentary Film Festival held a hackathon in Sydney in which teams of filmmakers, web experts and designers worked with mentors and experts to create prototypes in this field.³ However, without funding to further develop these projects, this initiative has given way to 'Horizons', a program within Antenna designed to engage with the shifts and intersections between technology and documentary; in 2016, the focus was on VR.

While not all interactive documentaries are funded through traditional avenues, this is a telling place to begin. A survey of Screen Australia funding for interactive documentary projects reveals similar tendencies regarding film funding, with strong links to traditional broadcasters the ABC and SBS. Of the forty projects funded from 2008 to 2015, almost all were web-based and twenty-five had broadcast support – nine with the ABC and sixteen with SBS.⁴ Webdocs have, thus far, often been funded through multi-platform

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initiatives that have an online edition incorporating supplementary material and perspectives. These webdocs might function independently, but the audience is usually drawn in after watching the related film or television series. One such example is Chocolate Liberation Front's *Kim Jong Il's Cinema Experience*,⁵ an interactive offshoot of *Aim High in Creation!* (Anna Broinowski, 2013). In this webdoc, the audience can learn about the history of North Korean cinema, study the eponymous world leader's manifesto for film production, and make their own propaganda film for their desired cause. From the given options, for example, they can choose the nature metaphor of 'wheat' paired with 'rallying music' with a cause like 'Stop Trump'. The results are playful and amusing, if not particularly complex, and having a task to fulfil makes the interactivity feel purposeful. As many webdocs are non- or multi-linear, the lack of goal-orientation or sense of purpose can often be a barrier to audience engagement – Jon Dovey identifies this very lack of consideration of the user experience within a film's design as an ongoing problem for webdoc audiences.⁶

Opposite, clockwise from top left: *Kim Jong Il's Cinema Experience*; *After 6/4*; *The Block: Stories from a Meeting Place*; *Beneath the Waves*; *My Grandmother's Lingo*; *Cronulla Riots: The Day That Shocked the Nation*

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Interactive online documentaries also present opportunities for the public broadcasters to expand on their regular programming and to support topical and innovative multicultural, linguistically diverse and/or educational content that aligns with their charters.⁷ One such example, available in both Chinese and English, is *After 6/4*,⁸ which commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of Tiananmen Square. This webdoc's structure features a timeline of events that compares Chinese and Western media reports of the same event. In doing so, it asks the viewer to question media representations of 'truth' from the two perspectives. In one sequence, visuals of the iconic 'Tank Man' are juxtaposed with the Chinese press's description of 'a lone scoundrel' and, by comparison, *The Wall Street Journal's* reference to the figure as 'the meaning of courage'. Making use of multiple materials, including news footage, images and articles, this project interrogates censorship and the ideological use of language in representing events.

Other interactive documentaries that similarly explore multiple positions and histories include *Cronulla Riots: The Day That Shocked the Nation*⁹ and *The Block: Stories from a Meeting Place*,¹⁰ both for SBS, and a number of projects for the ABC commemorating the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign.¹¹

The purposefulness of the webdoc

While webdocs have the potential to engage the audience through interactivity, they also often fall victim to users' tendency to click away to another website that is more instantly gratifying. Attention is the currency of the networked space, after all. With screen forms and ever-new technologies continuing to crop up, webdocs have to perform increasingly varied functions to remain relevant.

SBS's multiple-award-winning *My Grandmother's Lingo*,¹² which dissolves the borders between documentary storytelling and interactive gaming with an educational imperative, exemplifies one way to achieve this relevance. Entering the website, the first facts we learn are that a language is lost every two weeks globally, and that 'more than 90% of Australia's Indigenous languages are critically endangered'. We follow Angelina Joshua's quest to save her Indigenous language, Marra (from the Ngukurr region south-east of Arnhem Land), from extinction. Knowing that only three fluent speakers of this language remain, all of whom are elders, gives an urgency to this mission. The webdoc's interactive elements include repeating words and clicking on animated figures to unlock Indigenous stories, and it also provides educational supplements for schools to raise awareness about the cultural and linguistic importance of Marra. In this way, *My Grandmother's Lingo* fulfils documentary's traditional social functions to 'record, foster civic

participation and persuade' – imperatives that, according to Kate Nash, are even more salient for interactive forms of documentary.¹³

Additionally, institutions such as museums can provide a platform for linking existing and new audiences to interactive documentary projects as an extension of their educational mandate. The Western Australian Museum's *Beneath the Waves*,¹⁴ a co-production with Periscope Pictures, chronicles six years of marine-biology research conducted around the Kimberley. Drawing on traditional documentary conventions, the opening of this project is not dissimilar to what we might see on television – dramatic music, point-of-view marine activity and an expository voiceover – and, as audience members, we recognise this sorts of address immediately as informative and educational. Subsequently, however, additional videos must be unlocked in small chunks using a reward-based system. The format allows the audience to navigate through a map of the location or select topics such as scientists, various species or other factual material. Having a clear educational focus and visibility through the museum website gives this webdoc leverage in identifying and connecting with an audience.

Webdocs in the academic space

Despite the success of the aforementioned webdocs, questions regarding audience engagement and return-on-investment persist. However, such projects continue to present potential for diverse and engaging viewpoints and narratives, expanded participation and a rethinking of traditional top-down documentary production. Helen De Michiel and Patricia Zimmermann claim that the merging of new and old technologies as well as the community engagement in production and distribution allow an 'opening up [of] complex dialogues that reject binaries'.¹⁵ These also enable audiences – as users – to co-create meaning, shifting knowledge-construction and sole authorship away from traditional gatekeepers.

Beyond the funded projects mentioned in the previous section, academic institutions have become sites for testing out alternative and interactive models of documentary production, participation and distribution. Using mobile devices, user-generated content, GPS, YouTube and augmented reality, for instance, the *Viewfinders*¹⁶ project is a collaboration between practitioner/researchers Max Schleser of Swinburne University, Gerda Cammaer of Ryerson University and Phillip Rubery of Massey University. Initial seed funding was provided by Ryerson and Massey – an alternative model that, while limited, might also accommodate more creative freedom. In *Viewfinders*, participants are asked to upload tracking shots filmed on trains,

planes, trams, bikes, boats or other forms of transport to an interactive online platform to form a database of travel panoramas. This project evolves based on the material submitted, with new technologies being tested and implemented as it develops. The *Viewfinders* team launched an AR app in July and will soon be travelling to galleries and festivals to promote the work, engaging with participants and audiences as part of the multidisciplinary project. This crossover thereby brings the online into the 'real world'.

Tertiary students are also taking up the creation of interactive documentaries as part of undergraduate and post-graduate courses and research. This allows documentary forms to be experimented with while not being restricted by industry and funding concerns. Affordable off-the-shelf software such as Klynt and Korsakow allow webdocs to be made and published online with no coding experience, creating a nexus of technology and documentary that carves out new paths in terms of representing the world and raises questions relating to knowledge, power and ethics.

But does all this playful experimentation in the academic space end with a lack of payoff, given the investment of time often required to make these projects? Even a cursory survey of the relatively small number of funded projects in Australia highlights the considerable technical resources and crew required for high-quality projects with thoughtful interactivity. Beyond production, if these projects are not located on well-visited websites, reaching audiences likewise proves difficult.

The future of the webdoc

With the current popularity of web series and VR, and the difficulty in locating audiences, what is the future of the webdoc in Australia? Writing from a global perspective and encompassing the broader field of interactive documentary, Dovey claims that, given the form is relatively new, more time is needed to ascertain its impact, establish audiences and develop a culture.¹⁷ These observations also apply to the Australian context, where webdocs are still relatively niche. While the scope of this article has accommodated a discussion of only a small selection of online projects, the documentary form continues to mutate and spread through other avenues of production and exhibition. Interactive documentary may promise much in terms of how material is engaged with and how knowledge is constructed, but it remains a marginal proposition. Documentary is essential in framing the complexities of the world, and these frames must continue to be debated and diversified, to push back against dominant approaches, and to constantly shift into new landscapes and hybrid spaces, welcoming multiple voices and incursions into previously uncharted territories.

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Endnotes

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